

Safety Effort Cuts Angeles Crest Toll

■ **Enforcement:** A yearlong crackdown aimed at bikers has sharply reduced the numbers of deaths and injuries.

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The winding two-lane mountain road above La Cañada Flintridge, with its switchbacks and cliff-hanging turns, made the Angeles Crest Highway a world-famous test of courage and skill for motorcycle riders.

It also gave "the Crest," as it is called, a reputation as a killer highway because of the alarming number of riders who died or were injured challenging its legendary hairpins.

Now, after a yearlong law enforcement crackdown and safety campaign, the California Highway Patrol is reporting that deaths and injuries are down sharply.

There were only two deaths from June 1999 to the end of May along a specially patrolled 38-mile stretch of the highway, according to the CHP. That compares with an average of five deaths a year from 1995 to 1999.

Injuries during the 12 months before June 1 dropped to 32, down from an average of 66 a year over the prior five years.

Over the years, commuters from Palmdale seeking a shortcut

through the mountains contributed to the carnage, but studies show motorcycles were involved in a disproportionate share of the accidents.

The CHP set out last year to change that.

With a special \$100,000 state safety grant paying overtime costs for weekend work, officers wrote about 1,400 tickets over a 12-month period, five to 10 times the normal amount. Most of the tickets were written on Saturdays and Sundays. Motorcyclists received about 20% of the tickets, according to CHP officers.

CHP Officers Give No Warnings

Tickets are being written with "zero tolerance" for anyone who goes over the 55-mph speed limit, and also for those who fail to turn on their headlights in a special safety zone or who cross the double yellow line.

"There are no warnings. Traffic laws are strictly enforced," said motorcycle officer J.A. Bavetta, who was on hand with other CHP officers to make the announcement Friday. "Believe me, it's done its job."

The stepped-up enforcement was

accompanied by a focused Caltrans effort to warn motorists. That campaign included warning signs and reminders of the strict enforcement.

A special flashing movable Caltrans message sign aimed directly at motorcyclists says: "Slow Down" and "Ride Easy. Ride Safe. It's Your Life."

In light of the campaign's apparent success, even tougher enforcement may be on the way. Assemblyman Jack Scott (D-Altadena) is carrying legislation that would double traffic fines along the special safety corridor.

Scott called the results of the safety campaign "genuinely remarkable."

"It says that, when we put our minds and/or efforts together, we

can make a real difference," he said. The safety campaign has been renewed for a second year.

Dr. Cesar Aristeiguieta, now an emergency room physician at the County-USC Medical Center, pushed for the safety campaign after a particularly grueling weekend spent treating motorcycle accident victims while working for Huntington Memorial Hospital in Pasadena.

The physician said he helped treat four victims from three separate motorcycle accidents during a four-hour period in February 1999. Two of the victims died, one of them a 10-year-old boy who had been riding on the back of his father's motorcycle.

Aristeiguieta did a study of the Angeles Crest Highway—known on maps as California 2—and found that motorcycles were involved in

47% of accidents between 1995 and 1998. Statewide, fewer than 3% of registered motor vehicles are motorcycles.

Most Fatalities Involved Motorcycles

Even worse, Aristeiguieta said, "68% of all the people killed [on the Angeles Crest Highway] were riding motorcycles."

In addition to the human tragedy, the deaths and injuries carry a huge social cost, tying up law enforcement and emergency medical crews and forcing taxpayers to foot the bill for those services. Aristeiguieta estimates the drop-off in fatalities and injuries in one year saved taxpayers \$3.7 million.

The safety campaign is said to be contributing to something of a cultural change for the famed highway, which cuts through America's busiest national forest, linking the Los Angeles Basin and the Mojave Desert.

Motorcycle magazines have long extolled the beauty and dangers of the highway. International motorcycle tours have included a ride over the Crest along with tours of the European Alps. For years, bikers by the hundreds have met on weekend mornings to make the run from La Cañada Flintridge up to a popular hangout, Newcomb's Ranch.

Speed was often part of the challenge. One biker was clocked by a CHP radar gun doing 117 mph. It was not unusual for bikers to be ticketed for doing 90 mph or 100 mph.